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**ON THE FRINGE OF THE
HOLOCAUST**

George Brawerman

INTRODUCTION

On May 9 1940, the Germans invaded Belgium, as well as Holland. This was yet another step in Hitler's grand scheme to subjugate Europe. Soon devastation and death on a massive scale would ensue through most of the continent. The conquest was carried out in a series of steps, each bolder than the previous one. In the initial stages, the Allies, French and English, were lulled into believing that Germany had only modest goals in mind, and would be soon satisfied. They were ill-prepared when Hitler unleashed the full might of the German Army directly on them. Hitler's intentions took on a particularly sinister character when it came to the Jews. He had proclaimed loud and clear that the Jewish race should be eliminated, and persecutions of Jews in Germany early on showed that he meant business.

I was 13 years old when the war came to our doorsteps. Hopes that the Nazi beast would be contained soon evaporated and we were left at the mercy of a deadly enemy. The Germans used the same insidious stepwise approach to the elimination of the Jews as they had used to lull the Allies into a false sense of security. Only two years later did they start wholesale roundups, grabbing any Jew they could lay their hands on. I was fifteen when I went into hiding, having survived the initial roundups. The German Army was then at the peak of its power. Most of Western and Central Europe was occupied, and the Wehrmacht was reaching far into the confines of the vast Russian Empire. Most of Northern Africa was under its control and it looked like the Middle East was going to be the next victim. In this context, prospects of eluding the Nazis long enough to see their demise seemed particularly grim.

In early 1943, during my first year underground, the Germans started to suffer their first major reverses, both in Russia and in North Africa. However, there was plenty of fight left in their armies and progress by the Allies seemed painfully slow. While Germany's military situation

became progressively more difficult, the Nazis never let go of their maniacal onslaught on the Jews, almost as if eliminating them were more important than winning the war.

In late 1943 I completely lost contact with my parents. I found out later, after the liberation, that my father had been caught during that time. My mother managed to elude the Nazis, and somehow survived under desperate conditions.

Brussels was liberated on September 3 1944. I was seventeen when relieved of the German terror. I found some of my old friends, and together we started to think of a new world free of war and tyranny. Then came the reports of Nazi extermination camps, where masses of human remains had been found. A period of anxious waiting ensued, to see whether any friends and relatives might be among the few survivors. My father did not come back. He was apparently killed in Auschwitz. Of my large family in Poland only one uncle with his wife and sons survived. They had escaped from the German-occupied zone to Russia.

The following is a fragmentary personal account of life under the German terror. It is not meant as a complete description of my life during the four years of German occupation. Its major purpose is to convey what it felt like to be a Jewish adolescent being exposed to an oppressor bent on his destruction.

I. UNDER THE GERMAN YOKE

The Nazis are coming

A long and fearful night

We were all huddled in the firehouse, with the forlorn hope that a municipal building would offer us some protection against rampaging German soldiers. Our fears were fed by bitter memories of the brutal occupation of Belgium by Germany during World War 1. For those of us too young to have experienced this ordeal, the repeated accounts by our elders, both at school and at home had been sufficient to instill into us both fear and hatred of the Germans. For us Jews, exposed for years to the savage ranting of Adolph Hitler, the prospects seemed particularly terrifying. The persecutions of Jews, first in Germany, then in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland as these countries fell one by one under the German yoke, showed that the Nazis meant business. It seemed clear that they were bent on our elimination, although at the time we had no inkling of the coldly methodical way in which this was going to be carried out.

Our saviors come and go.

So much had happened in the past two weeks! Rapidly unfolding events had shattered our belief that the French and British armies would eventually put an end to the German lust for dominance and destruction. For about a year, after the Allies had declared war on Germany, nothing much had happened. This "funny war", as we called it in Belgium, consisted of the opposing armies eyeing each other across the French-German border. In Belgium, criticism of Germany was discouraged, in keeping with the "neutrality" status of the country. These efforts to remain neutral, however, did not save us from the fury of the German army as it struck without warning early in May 1940. "Forget about going to school today" said a passing friend as I was about to leave on a beautiful sunny morning in May. "The Germans have attacked and all the

teachers have been called up in the army." Although opportunities for skipping school were always greatly appreciated, this one reason filled us with much anxiety.

In the next few days, as the Belgian army was fighting stubbornly in the Ardennes, French and British columns were rolling through Brussels on the way to the front. The well-equipped and confident troops were greeted with much enthusiasm. There was a general sense of relief fed by our expectation that the Germans were finally going to be taught a lesson, now that the mighty power of the civilized world was being unleashed on them.

This state of euphoria, however, did not last long. A few days later, tired, dirty and demoralized British and French soldiers were rushing back in the opposite direction. It quickly dawned on us that the Allies were in full retreat and that nothing was going to protect us from our nemesis. A state of cold despair gradually took hold of us.

Aborted escape

What were we to do? Many Jewish families, as well as many Gentiles, decided to flee toward France, leaving most of their belongings behind. Others, including my parents, remained hesitant. As the Germans were approaching Brussels, the tension became more and more unbearable. Finally, we decided to leave. Train convoys were being organized, but, when we arrived at the station, we were faced with hordes of would-be refugees trying to board the few available trains. We did manage to get on one of them, and started to feel some degree of relief. However, the train did not move, and policemen walked through the railroad cars checking identity papers. The object was to insure that Belgian citizens would have first priority, and all foreigners were taken off the train. Being originally immigrants from Poland, we had to get off, even though we were those most vulnerable to persecution if left behind. I was in tears, full of anxiety as well as shame at being singled out. We lingered on along the railroad tracks, as more trains were being assembled. After a seemingly endless wait, we were allowed on board and our train left at a snail's pace.

The journey did not last long. The train crept on with many stops and starts, and finally stopped for good. After a while, all passengers had to get off. The tracks were apparently blocked. There we were, walking on a road in the direction of the far away French border, dragging our suitcases. Further down on the side of the road, some French soldiers were resting next to their trucks. Wouldn't it be nice if we could hop on a truck and be taken by them through what we thought would be the safety of the French border! At that time we were still under the delusion that the border would remain a firm obstacle to further German advance. My father went as far as to say that he wanted to volunteer for service in the French army, and could they take him and his family to France? As a thirteen-year old still full of respect for his parents, I was shocked to hear what seemed like a lie, given my father's anti-militaristic feelings as well as his questionable physical condition. Anyway, the soldiers were not interested and departed without us.

By then, walking on the road was getting dangerous, as German planes were flying overhead. We realized that pushing on would be pointless, and decided to go back. Several times we had to take cover in ditches along the road, to hide from low-flying German planes. One man had been traveling with a case of beer, and decided to distribute his treasure during one of the pauses. Eventually we were able to hitch a ride on a truck bound for Brussels. We saw the first ravages of war in the form of burning buildings along the road, but made it back to the city without mishaps. The arrival of the German army was apparently imminent.

Peaceful beginning to the German Occupation

After a restless night in the firehouse, we awoke to the sounds of chanting troops marching in cadence. The Germans had arrived, but not as a rampaging mob as we had feared. Well-disciplined columns in dress uniform were parading along the deserted major thoroughfares. Realizing that life was going to go on, at least for the time being, people started to emerge from their hiding places. Economic activity resumed gradually, with stores reopening and people going back to their jobs.

Even people who had managed to flee to France were coming back. We were unable to comprehend at first why Jews would voluntarily expose themselves to Nazi persecution when they could have remained in the part of France that had been spared the German occupation. However, living conditions for refugees in the "Free French Zone" were far from ideal, and most of them had been placed in camps. Eventually, those who remained ended up being treated nearly as badly as in the occupied territories.

There was one important change in school. Most of the male teachers had been called up in the army, and were now prisoners of war. We had to go to the girls' school, sharing classes with our female counterparts. This was quite a novelty for us. In our class, consisting of thirteen-year olds, boys and girls did not get along at all. The teacher even took advantage of this antagonism by placing a boy next to a girl during exams, to insure that there would be no exchange of information. We were surprised at the time that relations were much more friendly in the next higher class, composed of fourteen-year olds.

A mild prelude to persecutions against Jews.

At first, the administration set up by the military authorities showed no particular interest in us Jews. We along with everyone else went back to our normal occupations. At the end of the Summer, I went back to my regular school routine, since our teachers had been released from the army camps. My schoolmates remained friendly towards us, and most of the teachers were generally quite correct. There had always been an undercurrent of dislike of Jews, and of foreigners in general, among the Belgian population. However, the near-universal hatred of the German occupiers led to a measure of sympathy toward us, their immediate targets. Even one of our teachers who was always promoting enthusiastically the merits of the New (Nazi) Order, behaved correctly toward us. Unfortunately, this was not true of everyone. One of my good friends, Simon, after some minor infraction, was subjected to a volley of racial insults and blows by a teacher. The class watched this sickening episode with disgust.

As the German military authorities and their local cronies began to organize the "New Order," they turned their attention to the "Jewish problem." Although the press and radio were full of diatribes against this "underclass," the regulations affecting us seemed mild at first. Jewish business enterprises were subjected to some restrictive regulations and had to accept an "Aryan" overseer. This did not affect us directly, since my father was a tailor working for a non-Jewish shop. He just went to work as usual, leaving on a streetcar for downtown in the morning and coming back in the evening. An 8:00 PM curfew was imposed on Jews. This was not much of a hardship, but it served to remind us of our special status.

The Jewish population was anxious to comply with every restrictive regulation, hoping that playing by the rules would spare us from much harsher treatment. The Nazi authorities had set up a Jewish Community Council charged with implementing the discriminatory steps against their own people. Of course, all Jews had to register with this organization. The lists produced in this fashion proved very handy later on when they were used to call Jews for "labor camp" duty. I suspect that my mother never registered me, which may have been one reason why I managed to survive.

We lose touch with our family in Poland

The invasion of Poland by the Nazis had been of special concern to us because of our large family there. They lived in a small town, Biala Podlaska, that was situated close to the demarcation line between the German and Russian zones, unfortunately on the German side. We had been getting occasional letters from them before the arrival of the Germans here, but nothing since then. In view of the well-publicized threats of the Nazis against the Jews, this silence was a constant source of worry for us. We also saw in it a foretaste of things to come in Belgium

Stirrings of defiance

An endless minute of silence

It was 11:00 AM, on November 11, just a few months after the arrival of the Germans. I was standing in front of the class, keeping silent and looking nervously at my watch. The teacher, who had called on me to answer some question, kept on looking at me, puzzled by my failure to speak. He finally realized what was going on and waited for the minute to end. I then proceeded quickly with my answer and went back to my seat. I was worried about this rather foolish act of "heroism," especially since this particular teacher was an enthusiastic proponent of the New Order.

We had decided to commemorate Armistice Day in our class. This day marks the end of World War I and the defeat of the German armies. It is remembered every year by keeping a minute of silence at 11:00 AM, in memory of those that were killed during that war. Of course this ceremony could not be held publicly, now that the Germans were here again. We had pledged ourselves to keep silent for one minute at the designated time, no matter what. As luck would have it, I had been called to the blackboard at that time. Fortunately, the teacher, behaving like a gentleman, decided to ignore this episode.

No hope on the horizon

Acts of defiance against the occupying powers and their native cronies seemed completely futile. The amazingly swift and overwhelming victory of the Germans over the Western powers had left us in a state of utter despair. The German army and its Italian ally were now controlling most of Western and Central Europe, with only a few small countries left whose occupation was not deemed necessary. It was also making great strides in North Africa. England was in a desperate fight for its survival, and the Soviet Union had concluded a non-aggression pact with the German Devil. The Nazis had proclaimed a new empire that was to last for a "thousand years." It seemed that we were to remain under the German yoke forever, or at least until the

Nazis would exterminate us. Ironically, the Communists, who could have been counted on as a force of organized resistance, were now on the other side of the fence, as a consequence of the Stalin-Hitler pact. The Communist party, which was outlawed before, had even become legal under the Nazi administration! Many of our friends with leftist tendencies were thoroughly shocked and confused. They were torn between implicit conviction that the Russians knew what they were doing, and outrage at their embracing a cruel enemy.

Keeping up with war news

We were hungry for any sign that the seemingly invincible German war machine might begin to flounder. We were almost completely dependent on the official press and radio, and the news about military operations were invariably depressing. It seemed that nothing could stop the German onslaught. Still we would scrutinize the news bulletins to search for anything positive -from our point of view- that might be hidden between the lines. The fact that England had not fallen yet was somewhat encouraging, although the British were clearly subjected to a ferocious onslaught and were fighting for their lives. Listening to British broadcasts was of course illegal. Nevertheless, people with short-wave radios would occasionally tune in to messages of hope from the outside -still free- world.

At school, we would exchange bits of information, impressions and interpretations, trying to keep up our spirits. One teacher in particular was very eager to encourage these discussions, and would devote time at the beginning of the class for this purpose. I must admit that we would try to prolong these discussions, in order to avoid as much as possible his regular subject matter.

Should we work for the German war effort?

One evening, during the second year of occupation, my father came home from work all upset. "I have signed up for working on German army jackets," said he. My mother and I responded with stunned silence, torn between the desperation of our need for extra income to purchase food and fuel and our horror of contributing to the German war effort.

The German army needed winter clothes, and they were paying good money to anyone willing to manufacture winter jackets for their troops. Very soon Jewish contractors and workers became involved in this effort. The jackets could be sewn at home after regular working hours. This could provide a handy supplement to regular incomes that were far from adequate to support a family. At first, my father refused to consider the possibility of working for the Germans. We were outraged at Jews who were willing to help the very people who had sworn to eradicate them from the earth. However, we kept on hearing of more and more of our acquaintances who had given in to the temptation. It looked now like my father had joined them in this infamous decision.

Actually, our small family was very badly off. In the aftermath of the German army's arrival, shortages in essential goods started to develop. Food was a major concern, and people had first tried to stock up on any non-perishable item that could still be found in stores. These meager supplies, however, did not last very long. Food rationing was soon established. Although it was still possible -but illegal- to supplement the meager rations through the black market, prices of food items had rapidly become exorbitant. In the winter, finding coal for heating and cooking had also become a problem.

Our reaction to my father's decision must have been very eloquent, since the next morning he told us that he had changed his mind and that we would simply have to manage with what we had.

A real resistance movement?

There were hints of more serious opposition to the occupying powers. These came to us through warnings in the German-controlled press of swift retribution against acts of "terrorism." Punishment was in the form of execution of those caught in the act, but also of slaughter of groups of "hostages" rounded up after each announced terrorist action. These seemed to be directed not only against German officials, but also against prominent Belgian collaborators. Although we were full of admiration for these acts of bravery, these seemed to us like hitting a stone wall with bare hands.

First glimmers of hope

The Germans take on a mighty enemy

At first the sneak attack by the German army against the Soviets, in June 1941, had the effect of relieving our sagging spirits. Perhaps this time the Nazis had gone too far and would be finally taught a lesson. However, the war news rapidly became very depressing. The German army was moving at lightning speed across the Russian countryside, swallowing entire armies along the way. Within a few months, they had reached the gates of Leningrad and Moscow, far inside the Russian hinterland. However, a new term started to creep up in the official news reports: "Strategic Realignment." We soon realized that this was a euphemism for "Retreat." With renewed hope, I was marking daily the troop movements on a large map of the Russian front that was hanging on the wall in our apartment. It became clear that the German Winter offensive against Moscow had been stopped and that the Germans had been pushed back a considerable distance. However, this was by no means a rout, and the Germans remained well entrenched in Russian territory. Our potential saviors from the East were still far away from us, also locked in a death struggle. The next Spring, total gloom prevailed again as the Germans resumed their lightning offensive, gobbling up huge chunks of Russian territory.

The Americans enter the war

One cold Winter morning, during a school recess spent indoors because of the inclement weather, we heard whispers about the United States having declared war on Germany. This was electrifying news indeed. Surely the mighty power of that great country would be able to crush the seemingly invincible Germans. True, the circumstances surrounding this action did not seem very uplifting. The Nazi-controlled press was gloating over the destruction of the American fleet by the Japanese in Pearl Harbor, and over the lightning blows suffered by both the British and the Americans in the Far East. It looked like the Japanese were as invulnerable a fighting force

in the Far East as the Germans were in Europe and North Africa. All that had changed was that we were exposed now to two endless streams of bad news instead of one.

Anti-Jewish measures begin in earnest

A fateful turning point in the entrapment of the Jews.

I was standing in line at the Town Hall. All the people waiting were Jews, and also non-Jews with some "Jewish blood." There were even some Catholic priests in the waiting line. The purpose was to have our identity papers stamped with the word "Jew" in big red letters. When it was my turn to present my identity card, the clerk asked me casually whether I really wanted this stamp (perhaps with the aim of saving me from sinister consequences in the future). I fully appreciated the implication, but was not about to disobey a German command. My answer was "I guess so."

At first, anti-Jewish regulations had been relatively mild. Now an edict that seemed rather innocuous at first had been pronounced. All Jews were to have a stamp on their identity card marking them as such. Together with this announcement had come a detailed set of criteria for who was to be considered a Jew. Although full of apprehension, we had brought ourselves to believe that this regulation was simply to satisfy the German mania for precise bookkeeping and cataloguing. Little did we realize then the fact that identifying a person as a Jew was not necessarily a simple matter, unless his or her identification papers carried this information. Of course most of us had presented ourselves to the local authorities to receive our stamp. To do otherwise was unthinkable, since it could have exposed us -in our minds- to the wrath of the Germans. By achieving easy compliance at this point, the Nazis had made compliance with subsequent harsher measures more difficult to avoid.

Later on I found out that Henri, a good friend of mine, had chosen not to have his card stamped. Even though his family name was rather Jewish, he went through the remaining years of German occupation unaffected by the anti-Jewish measures.

The badge of infamy

I was walking down the steps toward the street, full of apprehension and shame. This bright yellow thing sewn onto my jacket felt like a hot coal burning right through me. Now I was clearly marked as a person apart, exposed to scorn and abuse by those having absolute power over us. As I stepped gingerly onto the street, trying to hide this identifying mark with my arm, a passerby gave me a sympathetic glance. While walking to school, the initial shock started to ease off a little, although the anxiety would remain for a long time.

The latest edict from the military government had been that all Jews were to pick up yellow stars marked with the letter "J." These had to be worn at all times, sewn on an outer garment. Regardless of the consternation at this ominous act, my father, always the conscientious craftsman, did a careful and fine sewing job.

The wearing of the yellow star had some immediate practical consequences. Infraction of the 8:00 PM curfew was now much more dangerous, since a Jew walking on the street past this time could be easily spotted. I did go once through the nightmarish experience of hurrying home in the evening, trying to hide my star without being conspicuous about it. It was Summer and I had gone to a park at the edge of the city with a friend who did not have a star. This "friend" had talked me into staying out past the curfew time. When I finally reached home my parents were beside themselves. My father was so upset that he could not even give me the thrashing that I certainly deserved.

Another episode was more uplifting, in a bittersweet way. We were at the public ceremony at the end of the school year, where prizes for excellent performance were being awarded. When I was called twice to the front of the audience to receive a prize, the heavy applause was probably as much a show of sympathy for a kid wearing a yellow star as an appreciation of his school performance.

It was fully realized at the time that, with this striking identifying mark, Jews would become easy targets for further persecution. Why did then most of us comply with this order? At this point, we

felt that we had little choice in this matter, since we were already identified as Jews through our identity card.

Beginnings to the final solution

Jewish men are summoned to labor camps

An ominous development was taking place. Notices were being sent to Jewish men, including adolescents, for them to assemble at departure points for transport to labor camps. They were to take along a small suitcase. The implications seemed sinister, yet most people were complying with this summons, conditioned as we were to the belief that resistance would bring harsh punishment. This attitude led to some tragic situations. One of my friends, who had received a summons, was planning not to go. His parents, however, horrified at the thought of defying the Germans, put strong pressure on him to comply. He did go, and was never heard from again. A friend of my parents and his young son, who had both escaped from Germany a few years earlier, decided to go dressed only in flimsy Summer clothes, with the hope that they would be turned back. This pathetic scheme did not work, and they disappeared for good.

My father did receive a summons. However, my mother was determined to spare him this ordeal. She tried various offices, and even went to the German Kommandantur. I don't know how she did it, but she came back with an exemption, based on medical reasons. As for myself, I was lucky enough not to receive a summons. I suspect that I have my mother to thank for it. She had apparently decided not to register me with the Jewish Community Council, and as a consequence I was not on the official list used for the call-up.

As the call-up continued, resistance to compliance increased. People were becoming more and more uneasy at the implication of this call to "work" duty, and were opting instead for life in hiding. This situation was evidently becoming intolerable to the German authorities.

The Germans take off their gloves

One morning, we woke up to sounds of shouting in German, stomping of boots, breaking of doors, and screaming. It looked like the German soldiers were on a rampage, forcing open entrance doors and grabbing people. We quickly retreated from our second floor apartment to the attic of the small house where we were living. The sounds of violent break-in and screaming seemed to last forever. After all was quiet we realized that our house had been overlooked. Perhaps the fact that the ground floor was unoccupied had led the brutes to believe that the whole house was empty.

When we ventured out, we saw many houses with broken doors, where Jews had been living. A good friend of mine who lived halfway down the street had also been spared, together with his family. However, another friend on the same street had not been so lucky. He was grabbed by the Germans, together with his parents. We were in a daze, realizing that this event marked the end of complacency on our part. There was no longer hope of surviving by heeding the German edicts. The yellow stars were quickly removed, and people who had been spared in this initial roundup started to look for places to hide. Some of us had survived two years of Nazi occupation, but how much longer would our luck last?

II. LIFE UNDERGROUND

Escape from the City, Summer and Fall of 1942

The Summer camp at Chevlipont

We arrived at the camp after a half-hour walk from the railroad station at Laroche-en-Brabant. I was part of a large group of young people bound for a month's vacation in the country. I did not know anyone in the group, and hopefully no one among my companions knew that I was Jewish. My identity card with the Jewish stamp was tucked away at the bottom of my suitcase. The camp was run by a charitable organization headed by Mme Solvay, a member of a highly prominent Belgian family. Amid the turmoil that had followed the brutal roundup of Jews, my parents had obtained a doctor's certificate stating that I needed to spend some time in the countryside, and were able to get me admitted to the camp for the Summer. Of course, the camp administration was well aware of my identity. My parents and I had parted with a heavy heart at the railroad station in Brussels, not knowing how long we would be separated and how long we would be able to elude the Nazis.

The camp was tucked away deep in the countryside, at the site of a former grist mill in a heavily-wooded area. Except for a café a few hundred feet down the road, there were no other dwellings for quite a distance. The two nearest villages, Villers-la-Ville and Laroche-en-Brabant, were about a half-hour walk away. There were two great advantages to the site. One was that the countryside was beautiful, with many paths radiating through the woods in all directions. The other was that, owing to its remoteness, it was of no immediate interest to the German authorities. Being able to walk around without the sight of the hated and feared German uniform was an enormous relief.

Adjusting to a new way of life

Aside from the fact that I could not talk to anyone about my background and concerns, life in the camp was quite pleasant. We spent a lot of our time hiking in the woods and doing organized outdoor games. Next to the camp was a pond, created by damming the small stream that was running through the camp. The pond served originally to feed the water wheel of the grist mill. It was possible to swim in it, and this is where I learned to swim. Beyond the pond, towards Villers-La-Ville, were the imposing ruins of an ancient abbey. It was quite easy to climb over the wall that surrounded the vast abbey grounds, and to roam around the remains of the many buildings there.

We were also assigned various tasks, such as household cleaning and helping in the kitchen. Peeling potatoes and washing dishes and pots and pans were seemingly endless duties. Most of this was quite a novelty for me, accustomed as I was to the notion –instilled by my mother– that I was too fragile for most physical activities. I found that I was quite capable of physical exertion, and rather enjoyed it.

I see a familiar face

A few weeks after our arrival, a newcomer appeared, Izrael S. We knew each other through our parents, who were friends. Even though only remotely acquainted, we were delighted to see each other. It was quite a relief to be able to talk freely about our common plight. He explained to me how he had come upon this camp. His mother had been trying desperately to find a hiding place for him, but in vain. She had met my mother by chance, and found out from her about the Solvay Summer camp. When I saw him again after the war, he said that he probably would not have survived without this chance encounter.

I stay on in the Fall

As the Summer was drawing to an end, we started to worry about what was going to happen next. We had little knowledge of the state of Jewish persecutions. This was hardly an

appropriate topic of conversation in the camp. From occasional guarded postcards from my parents, I knew that at least they were still around.

It turned out that the camp was going to remain open after Summer vacation. My parents had evidently arranged for me to stay. Most of the children returned to Brussels to go back to school. Another, small contingent arrived, consisting primarily of young people who wanted to stay away from the city for one reason or another. Among these were a few Jews. Being able to exchange information and common concerns was a great relief to us.

Camp chores

The camp took on a different character. We were expected to participate more actively in maintenance. Several groups were organized, with different responsibilities. One, to which I belonged, was responsible for finding firewood. It was an important task, since this was going to be the major source of fuel for keeping the buildings warm in the Winter. The woods (mostly pine trees) around us were managed as a tree farm, with small parcels being harvested on a rotating basis and reseeded so that the new trees would be fully grown after the end of the cycle. The owner had given us permission to gather dead trees and limbs. In our eagerness we would occasionally cut down a live tree. Finally the landowner threatened to close down our camp if we persisted in stealing his good trees.

Another group was responsible for the vegetable garden. Among many other things, they had planted string beans. Although I was definitely not a farm boy, I recognized the type of beans that were coming up as pole beans, because I had once tried to grow some on our balcony in Brussels. Mine was an important contribution, because the "farmers" thought that they had planted bush beans, and had neglected to set up poles for the plants to grow on.

We also had individual tasks, and the staff had unwisely put me in charge of the rabbits. These were big beasts, and I did not feel very comfortable near them. The first time I opened the hutch to put carrot greens in the cage, one of them escaped. People in the camp engaged in pursuit, and the animal was captured after a wild chase. Needless to say, I was relieved of this duty.

Later on, my more intellectual qualities were recognized and I was asked to help with the bookkeeping.

We also had to get milk and other supplies. The milk was obtained from area farms that could be reached after a long walk through the woods. Even though the return trip was rather strenuous because of the weight of the full can, this was a prize duty that was occasionally rewarded by a nice slice of white bread from the farmer. At that time, the store-bought bread was terrible, with respect to appearance, taste and nutritional value. The flour available to bakeries was mixed with various unpalatable ingredients.

Camp uniforms

Upon our arrival in the Summer, we had been issued light khaki shirts, short pants and socks, as well as black bérets. The shirts, pants and socks were replaced weekly. The rest, shoes and underwear, were our own responsibility. Now that the Summer was over, a sweater and a warm cape were added to our uniform. We also received wooden clogs, of the type used by peasants. These were quite warm when lined with straw.

While most young people were able to replenish their underwear from home, I and my other Jewish colleagues had a problem. We had to find ways to keep our underwear and handkerchiefs clean, and make sure that our shoes would last as long as possible. I would do my own laundry in a basin, heating the water over a wood fire.

An unwelcome visit

In spite of my inability to interact with my parents and my former friends, life in the camp was relatively pleasant, and it was possible at times to overlook the raging inferno that was devouring the world around us. Suddenly, the anxiety returned. A group of Germans in uniform had entered the camp. This visit was apparently precipitated by the fact that we were raising the Belgian flag every morning, in good Boy Scout style. As they were examining the books, our Director was running around smashing window panes in the old grist mill buildings, on which the Communist

emblem, hammer and sickle, had been painted. He saw me, together with another Jewish friend, and told us to better get lost in the woods. We wandered around for a few hours, then approached the camp cautiously. Everything seemed quiet and there were no Germans in sight. They had not found anything suspicious, and left without causing any trouble.

My mother comes to see me

One day I had an unexpected visit. My mother had come from Brussels to see me. This had taken much courage, because of the risk of identity checks on the train and in stations. The fact that she was not very proficient in the French language, thus marking her as a foreigner, certainly did not help. She told me of life in hiding in Brussels. Amazingly, my father was still going to work every day, braving the risk of sporadic identity controls on the streetcars and on the street. They were going to try to keep me in the camp as long as possible. As I watched her go back, leaving me in a state of relative safety, I found it difficult to imagine how she and others could go on living in the city under the constant fear of being caught.

A baffling recycling policy in the camp

The camp population was in a state of flux. Some young people would leave, to be replaced by others. Two of the Jews among us were told that they would have to leave, even though they had nowhere else to go and hide. There seemed to be no good reason for this decision, particularly since I together with Izrael were allowed to stay. After they left, to an uncertain fate, some new Jews came with the next contingent. It looked like the camp administration in Brussels did not want to hide the same people for too long. From our point of view, this seemed rather cruel. As for myself, I realized that I might be a next victim of this policy.

Hiding in the City, Winter 1942

Return to the cauldron

I was walking from the railroad station back to our home in Brussels, dragging my suitcase. As I had feared, the camp administration had finally decided to "recycle" me too. The city that I had left only a few months before seemed strange to me. The sense of fear had returned with the first sight of Germans in uniform, particularly since I knew that Jews were being hunted now. I was not wearing the identifying star anymore, but knew very well that any demand for my identity papers would have exposed me as a prey. My parents were still living in the same house, but had moved from their second floor apartment to the attic. The rest of the house was empty. My father still went to work downtown every day. His employer knew that he was Jewish, but kept him on. My mother ventured in the street only for short shopping trips.

Contact with friends and acquaintances that had survived the initial roundup was very limited. Walking outdoors was rendered more hazardous by the fact that a Jewish informer accompanied by security agents in civilian clothes was roving the streets, searching for familiar faces. Strangely, one could still see a few people walking around with the yellow star on their chest. These had special jobs with the Administration and seemed to be protected from persecution. I was surprised to see in the street the father of a good friend of mine, walking furtively and trying to mask the star on his overcoat. However, this protected status proved to be not very reliable, since he was eventually arrested and sent away never to return.

I find an old friend

I had been wondering whether my friend Léon, who used to live down the street, was still around. As I was finding it depressing to remain holed up in our attic with nothing to do and only my parents to talk to, I decided to venture to his apartment. He was still there with his parents. They had remained there in hiding throughout the Summer and Fall. The company of this good

friend made life more bearable. We would even go out together in the evening, venturing to movies and even to cafés.

How to obtain a new food rations card?

I was standing in an office at the local police station. The official seated at the desk was holding my identity card with the Jewish stamp, wondering what to do about my unusual request. Looking back through the translucent glass door, I could see my mother waiting anxiously outside.

We had debated at great length the problem of my lost food rations card, and come to the conclusion that the only way out was for me to go to the police to ask for a new one. This step was not without danger, since I would have to produce my identity card and an unsympathetic police official could then easily turn me over to the Nazi authorities. However, the rations card was the only means to obtain essential foodstuff. The alternative, to survive on costly black market food, was not possible since we did not have money to spare. Actually, I had not lost my card. The camp administration had simply neglected to return it to me when they decided to send me away.

I was lucky this time. After much hesitation, the man behind the desk decided to issue me a new card.

An innocuous encounter with traumatic consequences

I was walking on the nearly empty street one Sunday morning, making my way to a bakery. On the sidewalk, walking in my direction, were two German officers. This was by no means unusual, as uniformed German soldiers not on official duty were a constant presence. For some reason, I thought to myself that these two might be dangerous, and that I should be careful not to attract attention. However, as we passed each other, they stopped me. I immediately became panicky, convinced that they were going to arrest me. As it turned out, they were asking for directions. All flustered, I mumbled what must have been an incomprehensible answer. They went on, not paying any further attention to me, but leaving me in a deep state of shock. We found out later

that a neighbor had seen this episode from across the street and also thought that I was going to be in trouble.

This event, although innocuous, marked a turning point in my attitude toward Germans in uniform. Before, I was well aware of the dangers of living in hiding, but could cope with the situation in a reasonably rational way. After the encounter, the fear of Germans took on a much deeper meaning, leading to panicky reactions when cool judgment was required.

We move to a "safer" neighborhood

Our apartment was located on a major street, facing the firehouse and the Town Hall. This was hardly an ideal location for people who needed to avoid attention. We decided to move to a more secluded neighborhood, on a quiet street. We would then be living in a building with many apartments, with the hope of getting lost in the crowd. There would also be the opportunity to interact with non-Jewish acquaintances in the same building, instead of being holed up in the attic of an empty house. There were some new dangers involved in this change, since exposure to more people increased the risk of being reported to the Nazis. The actual peril came a year later from an unexpected source, when someone denounced a tenant involved in Communist activities and the Gestapo searched the whole building, finding my father in the process.

My father still went to work every day, and my mother still had to brave the food stores. As for me, I had to spend most of my time indoors, a very depressing situation. My encounters with Léon became less frequent, since we were living now farther away from each other. Young people of our age, fifteen and sixteen, were bound to attract attention when walking on the street instead of being at school. Moreover, the Belgian authorities were beginning to draft all young people for "labor" duty.

Stalingrad!

I was on the landing looking through an open window at the starry sky, even though it was bitter cold outside. I could hear in the distance some excited murmuring, with the word Stalingrad

barely audible. I knew that this Russian city on the Volga river had been under siege and virtually destroyed by the German army. The next day the cause of this excitement became evident. It seemed that the Germans had suffered a major defeat, with an entire army destroyed.

While we were trying to find ways to elude the Nazis as well as potential informants, there had been no comfort for us from the outside world. Salvation by the Allies seemed as remote as ever. The Germans had been advancing at breakneck speed toward the Southeastern confines of European Russia. They seemed just as invincible in North Africa, where they had gotten as far as Egypt. The Allies were also taking pounding after pounding in the Far East, with the Japanese easily overrunning Southeast Asia and large chunks of the Pacific islands.

The electrifying news about the rout at Stalingrad lifted our spirits for the moment. Together with the American landings in North Africa and the defeat of the Germans in Egypt, they seemed to herald a turning point in the fortunes of the Nazi empire. However, any possibility for rescue was still very remote for us, and we had to deal daily with the immediate problem of survival.

Search for a haven

Brussels was far from an ideal place to hide from the Germans. My parents had been trying desperately to get me out of the city. My mother went begging to the office of the Solvay organization. The response was that they would consider readmitting me if I had papers identifying me as a *bona fide* non-Jewish Belgian citizen. It was possible to obtain false identity papers, for a price. My mother was able to locate someone who promised to provide papers for me, and paid him in advance a considerable portion of our meager savings. After waiting for many days for him to show up again, we had to conclude that this transaction was a swindle.

My parents were trying various other avenues of escape. They somehow managed to have me admitted to a Catholic youth camp. This was not an ideal arrangement for me, as anything related to the Catholic Church made me feel rather uncomfortable. However, this seemed like the best solution available at the time. When all the arrangements were completed –or so we thought–, I went to see the priest who was running this youth program. After a chat discussing

my future life in the camp, he suggested that perhaps I would "see the light" (convert to Catholicism) while residing there. Politely, but firmly, I gave him to understand that this was very unlikely. It was obviously the wrong answer, since we never heard from him again. Other attempts also led to disappointment, until my mother found another broker in counterfeit papers who proved more reliable.

A temporary reprieve - Spring 1943

Leaving the city, panic takes hold of me

I was walking toward the railroad station, dragging my suitcase. My name was now Jacques Leclercq, as stated in my new identity card. The card seemed to me of dubious quality, but it had been good enough to secure my readmission to the camp where I had spent a few pleasant months, relatively free of anxiety. Nevertheless, I planned to avoid using this card as much as possible. This was the second separation from my parents, abandoning them to a life of constant danger and fear.

I was on a major street, full of traffic. A German soldier on motorcycle stopped at my side, eliciting instantly a state of uncontrollable panic. Again, it was a simple question, asking for the way to Mons. Unable to think straight, I pointed my hand in one direction, and he took off in a great hurry. Of course, it was the wrong direction. I quickened my pace, worried about this foolish action. A few minutes later, the motorcyclist returned at great speed, and gave me an angry look as he passed by. Fortunately, he was too much in a hurry to bother with me. After much anxiety, but without further mishap, I completed my journey to Chevlipont.

The sweet taste of freedom from fear

Not much had changed at the camp. There were some new people, but some of my former friends were still there, including Izrael. There were also some new young Jews. I enjoyed greatly the ability to roam around the countryside, a big relief after the months of confinement in

a small room in the city. I resumed my duties as "woodsman", and also helped Arthur, a young staff member responsible for ordering supplies, with his bookkeeping. This new friendship proved to be important for my survival.

I felt as if I had awakened from a nightmare. This state of affairs, however, was not going to last long.

Return to Brussels

I was again on the train, heading back to the city, full of apprehension. I had been told that they could not keep me in the camp any longer, although no reason was given to me. This time I was not going home directly, since it was not sure that I had anywhere to go. My new friend Arthur offered to have me go to his father's house in Brussels. From there I could try to find my parents.

My parents turn me away

I had written to my parents, so that they were not completely surprised to see me at the door, lugging my suitcase. They were of course happy to see me, but also very apprehensive. "You cannot stay here. You must go back immediately and say that we are not around anymore!" Confused and fearful, I tried to protest. My parents explained that the Solvay organization might take me back when made to believe that I had nowhere to go.

I walked back the rather long distance to the house of Arthur's parents, not at all sure of their reaction to my unwelcome appearance. They did take me in, although not with much enthusiasm. Evidently my parents had been counting on this kind of reaction, with the expectation that my reluctant hosts would then apply pressure on the camp administration to take me back. In the meantime, I had to adapt to a new family life, rather strict and Spartan. I did spend much time outdoors, doing hard work to help Arthur's father with his small business. I realized that this arrangement was strictly temporary, but did not know how it would end.

Back at the camp, Summer 1943

Once again, I was on my way to Chevlipont. My parents' scheme had worked. Seeing that I had nowhere to go, the Solvay organization had agreed to take me back. Upon my return, a new and more genuine-looking identity card was awaiting. I took this as a sign of a more permanent status as a camp resident. Still, there was a problem with this card. They had used my mother's maiden name, Piwo (the Polish word for beer). To make things worse, whoever filled it out had omitted the last letter, leaving me with the name "PIW." Eventually, the camp director added the missing "O." Still, I hoped that I would never have to use this card.

I had come back in the midst of the vacation season, and the camp was teeming with children on Summer holiday. I resumed my unofficial function as bookkeeper, and also had other duties such as going on errands in the surrounding towns. I enjoyed these activities, which gave me more freedom. After the Summer the camp returned to relative quiet. There were now a good number of young people who wished to stay away from the city for fear of being drafted as "Volontaires du Travail." This was a pro-Nazi organization that was rounding up people for labor duty

The long wait, Summer 1943 to Spring 1944**I lose my Jewish friend**

At the end of the Summer, there was a change in the camp administration. The Director had to resign. This turned out to be bad news for Izrael, who had become friendly with him and his wife. Apparently, they had managed to keep him in the camp at the time when I had to leave. Without this protection, Izrael was soon sent away.

A visit to the doctor

A group of us had made the trek to the doctor's office, located in the neighboring village of Laroche. Such visits were needed occasionally to treat infected wounds and nasty colds. As we

were in the waiting room, I noticed a new nurse that looked rather familiar. It was definitely Donat! We used to go on excursions together as part of a Jewish youth group, even during the first two years of German occupation. It was quite a shock to me to see a familiar face after a long period of isolation. What a coincidence that she was hiding in the same area! She gave me a furtive look, but did not let on that she knew me.

I wanted very much to talk to her. Soon after, there was a need to get supplies from the doctor's office, and I eagerly volunteered for the job. I had to take someone with me, a younger kid who also happened to be Jewish. As I entered the empty waiting room, Donat appeared, together with Rachel, another friend from the same group. We started to talk eagerly about old times and about our present situations. During all that time, Donat was busy cleaning up my numerous cuts and bruises. Finally I had to leave. I asked Benjamin, my companion, not to say a word about this meeting since I did not want to compromise them.

The next time I went to the doctor's, they were both gone, and I did not see them again till after the liberation.

An armed robbery

A call for help. We were sitting around the stove in the large room that served as dining hall, resting from the day's activities. There was scratching at the front door. We opened up, wondering who might be visiting us this late in the evening. The old lady from the café down the road was standing in front of us, all agitated. "There are robbers in the café. They have guns, and they have tied down my husband and my son. I managed to slip out without being noticed." We decided to go and take a look, driven by a desire to help the old lady, but also by the call for adventure. It was dark outside, and we could see light coming from the café. We trudged along the road, making quite a racket with our wooden shoes on the pavement. As we approached the café, we stopped, not knowing what to do. The old lady, more courageous than us, slipped silently to a window to look inside, and came back saying that the robbers were still there. After moments of indecision, we noticed two bicycles leaning against the wall near the front door.

Being told that these must belong to the robbers, we approached carefully, grabbed the bicycles, and took them back to our place. We hid them inside and barricaded our door, fearing that the robbers might want to break in. In the meantime, our Director called the police.

This action left us excited and somewhat fearful. We were also concerned that the news of our "raid" might spread to the village, and that whoever was responsible for the robbery might want to get even with us.

The robbers are caught. The next morning, the local police came to investigate. Of course they wanted the bicycles, and we reluctantly relinquished what we had hoped would remain a trophy for us. These bikes proved useful to them, since they led to the identification and arrest of the robbers. Thus it looked like we were directly responsible for their capture.

There was still the matter of wishing to remain anonymous. To our dismay, we learned that people in the village already knew the next morning what had happened as well as the identity of those of us who had participated in the stealing of the bicycles.

Most unwelcome congratulations. Weeks later, after we had already forgotten about this incident, we saw German Feldgendarmes approaching our building, accompanied by our cook. We quickly stuffed our pockets with British leaflets (dropped from airplanes) that we had just collected in the woods. The cook explained to us, a bit nervously, that the Germans had come to investigate the robbery, since guns were involved. They wanted actually to congratulate us for making it possible to catch the robbers!

As they were looking at us, the cook was trying to explain in broken German what young people who should be either in school or at work were doing here. "Kleine kranke Kinder" ("small sick children") was what he kept on saying. This was rather hard to believe, since we were all hefty and healthy-looking. The Germans were not really interested in us and left without incident, and we went back to reading our leaflets.

Fire in the sky

A plane comes down. It was a bright sunny day. Suddenly the clear blue sky was marred by an orange fireball. As we watched with dismay, two white parachutes were deployed and began their slow descent. Overflights by allied planes on their way to bombing missions in Germany had become increasingly frequent. Sadly, German anti-aircraft fire had caught one. At least the occupants had been able to jump from the burning plane.

We had been watching these planes with a sense of yearning for the life of freedom from persecution that they represented. Most were flying in thick formations at high altitude, far away from our reach, and of course unable to help us in any direct way. At least the thought of the poundings that the arrogant and beastly Nazis must be suffering in their own homes was gratifying. Occasionally low flying planes were passing by, dropping messages of hope in the form of leaflets. In one case, a British plane flew quite close to the ground, and we could even see the pilot. I was thinking that he could have almost snatched us up and taken us to freedom.

Surrounded by a German patrol. A few days later, as we were inside listening to a British broadcast, we found ourselves surrounded by German soldiers. They had gotten into the hall without us noticing them, and were also all around the building. A machine gun was in position covering the front door. Our first reaction was to turn off the radio, since tuning in to British stations was strictly forbidden. The soldiers, however, did not appear to have noticed the nature of the broadcast. After a quick search, the young officer asked us whether we had seen British fliers. They were evidently looking for the people who had parachuted out of the stricken plane. After a brief conversation in which we tried to explain our presence here, they left. We were pretty shaken, and also quite awed at the efficiency of this minor military operation. We also felt hopeful for the two fliers who had managed so far to elude German search parties.

A haunting song

The camp was somehow linked to the Boy Scout movement, and much of our leisure time was taken up by Scout activities. We had many outdoor games involving nature and man-made

tracking, hide and seek, simulated combat in the form of surprising the adversary from behind, etc. We learned a variety of outdoors skills, such as tying exotic knots and building a fire in the rain, that were part of the Scout badge program. We even had given each other totem names such as those used by Boy Scouts. Mine was "Brooding Heron," due to my long thin legs and my tendency to be moody. We also learned a great number of songs, and had even organized a chorale.

Occasionally people apparently associated with the Scout movement would come to visit, stay a few days, and go on. In the evening, we would all assemble with our guests around a campfire, for conversation, singing and playing skits. These encounters greatly increased our repertoire of songs. On one such visit we heard a new song that affected me greatly, as it seemed to reflect my present distressing circumstances and my yearnings for a life free of fear.

It started:

Loin dans l'infini s'étendent	Far in the distance lie
De grands prés marécageux	Vast swampy meadows
Pas un seul oiseau ne chante	Not a single bird sings
Sur les arbres secs et creux	On the dry and hollow trees

Oh terre de détresse	Oh land of despair
Où nous devons sans cesse	Where we must endlessly
Piocher, piocher	Toil, and toil

And ended:

Mais un jour dans notre vie	But someday in our lives
Le printemps refleurira	Spring will blossom again
Liberté, liberté chérie	Freedom, cherished freedom
Je dirai tu es à moi	I shall say that you are mine

Oh terre enfin libre

Oh land free at last

Où nous pourrons revivre

Where we can revive

Aimer, aimer

And love, and love

Much later, after the liberation, I found out that this song had originated in the German concentration camp at Dachau, where both Jews and non-Jewish political prisoners were held. During the long period under Nazi occupation, we had no knowledge of what was happening to the people taken by the Germans, and knew nothing of the death camps. I have always wondered how the person who taught us that song had come to know it.

III. THE END IS IN SIGHT

Joining the Resistance

June 6, 1944

We were assembled in the courtyard, prepared to undertake the long trek to a town closer to Brussels. We were going to visit a girls' camp, also run by Mme Solvay's organization. This was going to be a cultural exchange, involving songs and skits. We had worked hard to prepare for this event, and were rather excited at the prospect of contact with the opposite sex. The plan was to arrive there late in the afternoon, present our program, and return the next day.

There was another reason for excitement as we were waiting to depart. News bulletins that morning had mentioned an Allied landing on the coast of France. Our reaction was still rather subdued, due to our reluctance to giving in to false hope. There had been a landing the previous year in Dieppe, which had turned quickly into a fiasco. The net result for us had been a renewed feeling of awe at the effectiveness of the German army.

Since we were traveling on foot, there was no need to use the main roads. We went by back roads and footpaths, our spirits buoyed by marching songs and by the beautiful and peaceful countryside.

Stranded in a girls' camp

By the time we arrived, all hell had broken loose. The Germans were on full alert and had blocked all traffic on the main roads. There was also fear of searches. Only because of our use of back roads had we been able to reach the town unmolested. The program was called off and we were promptly whisked to the attic so as to remain out of sight. Fortunately our new hiding place was very spacious and we did not feel cramped. We were of course glad to see that the

Germans were taking this new landing very seriously, as judged by the strict security measures that they felt obliged to take.

Our unplanned stay lasted several days. We spent most of the time cooped up in the attic, and slept on rudimentary mattresses. The directors of both our own group and of the girls' camp had decided that we needed some distraction in order to blow off steam. We were allowed downstairs in the evening to socialize with our hosts. For some of us, this was the first interaction with girls in years. These contacts, limited to brief conversation, singing and some dancing, provided a boost to our morale.

An important choice

Our confinement ended in a rather unexpected way. One day a man came to speak to us, accompanied by Raoul, our director. He was introduced as a member of the Resistance, and told us about the opportunity to participate in the effort to rid ourselves of the hated oppressor in conjunction with the advancing Allies. Raoul announced that the camp at Chevlipont was going to function as a Resistance Center, and that those willing to enroll would be transported back to the camp. The others would have to return to their families.

I and many others felt exhilarated, and eagerly signed on. I was disappointed to see one of my best friends, Lucien, opting to return home instead. My other good friend, Jacques, was among those who joined, as I would have expected.

Another few days elapsed, and those who did not join left gradually as arrangements for their departure were made. With a heavy heart, I said good-bye to Lucien, a long-time companion, when his parents came to take him home.

Preparing a field hospital

We were back in Chevlipont. A covered truck had come to fetch our group, about two-dozen strong. Raoul, the Director, was among us. By then, security had been relaxed as the Allied invasion seemed to bog down in the coastal area where the landings had taken place. We

reached the camp quickly and without mishap. The place was eerily empty, except for the cook who had remained behind and was to continue to function in that capacity. All the maintenance duties were going to be our responsibility. Raoul remained in charge of the camp.

There was plenty for all of us to do. The camp was to be converted to a field hospital, apparently in anticipation of a paratrooper drop in the area. There were many beds available, since the camp normally serviced large numbers of children during Summer vacation. We had courses in first aid and became experts at applying bandages to all possible parts of the body.

Some foolish actions

Someone from the resistance movement had brought a few handguns and taught us how to handle them and clean them. Since there were not enough for everyone, those judged to be the toughest among us, like my friend Jacques, got them. I did not, which probably saved my life.

One day the gun-carrying people decided to try out their weapons. They disappeared into the fields. Some time later we heard gunshots. I cringed as I saw some villagers who happened to walk on the road stop in their tracks, then hurry away from the camp. When our warriors returned, all excited, they told of ambushing the mayor of the neighboring village –presumably a Nazi collaborator– and of trying to shoot him. Unfortunately, or fortunately, they were not yet used to controlling the recoil of the gun and their shots went up in the air. I was rather upset at this pointless act that could jeopardize our whole operation, but kept these thoughts to myself.

Our gun-toting colleagues were rather careless. They went everywhere with their weapons bulging out from their thin clothing. Inevitably, the goings on at the camp would become common knowledge in the area, knowledge that would eventually end up in the wrong ears.

We leave Chevlipont

We had done all we could to prepare the camp for a possible parachute drop. The Allies were still far away, and there seemed to be no prospect for action in the near future. Moreover, we

were aware that the Germans would eventually hear of our activities. It was decided that there was no point in us sticking around.

A villa belonging to Mme Solvay, located in the town of La Hulpe, was made available to us. We were given the choice of either staying on or moving to the new location. Most of us opted to leave, together with Raoul. A few, those who had been given the handguns, decided to stay. As I said good-bye to my friend Jacques, who was among those who stayed behind, I felt a bit like a coward deserting my colleagues. However, to stay would have been pointless as well as foolhardy.

Waiting for the Allies

The villa at La Hulpe

Our new accommodations were a far cry from the Spartan facilities at Chevlipont. We were in a rather luxurious building a few stories high, in a quiet well manicured small town. By now our numbers had dwindled to about twenty. The cook had come with us, so there was no problem getting fed, within the constraints of what was available, of course.

The atmosphere was quite relaxed. We felt increasingly more confident about the prospects of an early demise of the Nazis. By now, the Allies had broken out of the area initially overrun after the landing, and were racing through Northern France. Our allegiance to the Resistance seemed to have been completely forgotten, and we were waiting passively for freedom to come to us.

A visit from those who stayed behind

We had resumed our earlier camp activities, within the limitations imposed by a semi-urban environment. In retrospect, this may have seemed somewhat frivolous in view of the momentous events taking place literally at our doorsteps. However, there was nothing we could have done.

A few weeks after our arrival, we had a reunion with those who had remained at Chevlipont. They had come to visit for the day. This served as a reminder to us that others had opted for

active resistance. They were rather vague about their activities, but I had the impression that they were not doing very much. Although I was glad to see Jacques again, I felt a bit constrained, with a twinge of shame at having opted for a safer, perhaps more selfish solution.

Later on, after the end of the war, I met Jacques by chance on the street, and found out what had happened to them. They had finally been picked up by the Germans, and spent the rest of the war as prisoners in a fortress in Germany.

We lose our haven

After about a month, we were thrown back into the reality of the war. German officers appeared at our doorsteps. However, they were concerned strictly with army business. They needed the villa to house soldiers. Of course arguing with them was not an option. As they were discussing the details of the takeover with our director, closeted in his office, we got busy whisking furniture and beds away through windows. This was not simply a lark, as we were concerned about future living quarters.

Living in a castle

Outside the town was a castle belonging to the Solvay family. That is where we headed, by truck, together with the furniture that we had salvaged. Our group had gotten smaller, as some people had decided to go back to Brussels to their families. We were given accommodations in the garages, situated far away from the main building. We set up our cots and the few belongings left to us, undaunted by the sudden decrease in the quality of our living quarters.

We were asked to work in the fields surrounding the castle. It was hay-harvesting time, and I eagerly plunged into this new activity. This was a way to repay in a very modest fashion the life-saving hospitality provided by the Solvay family during this two-year ordeal.

Back in Brussels

Return to the city

We were on our way to Brussels, using perhaps the safest mode of transportation. Raoul, our director, always very resourceful, had managed to find an ambulance into which the dozen-odd people remaining in our group could fit. We had been following eagerly the news bulletins describing the rapid progress of the Allied forces, and it looked like their arrival in Brussels was imminent. We thought it preferable to be in the city at that time. Raoul had offered to have us stay at his parents' apartment.

The German war machine is falling apart

I was coming back to the city with mixed feelings. When I last left it, the fear of capture and annihilation was a constant presence. Although the Germans were still much in evidence, they somehow seemed less threatening. In fact, German soldiers striking out on their own, dragging meager belongings on improvised carts, were a common sight. It really looked like the German army was disintegrating. Some brave souls would unfurl Belgian flags on their balconies. These were quickly withdrawn, however, at the sound of shots.

The last day under the Germans

One morning Raoul's father appeared at the door lugging a side of beef on his back. There had been a run on the meat stores at the slaughterhouse, and no one was there to prevent it. Since food was still very hard to come by, this would provide a welcome addition to our diet.

Another sign of disintegration was the torching of the Palace of Justice. This imposing building, located on a hill in the middle of the city, was a familiar landmark visible from a wide surrounding area. It was quite a shock to see huge flames shooting out of its large dome. It seemed that the Nazi administration had set it on fire to destroy compromising records. As the building was burning, people in the neighborhood had formed a human chain to retrieve piles of documents.

All these signs of imminent departure of our oppressors left us with increasing feelings of exhilaration and excitement, and we were waiting eagerly for the appearance of the Allies, who we knew were advancing rapidly on the city.

Liberation !

A friendly handshake

It was night. We were roaming the streets, looking for the advancing column. Rumors of sightings were spreading like wildfire. There was sporadic shooting, but in our state of near hysteria we were paying no heed to it. In the excitement, our small band had fragmented and I was on my own without even realizing it. Suddenly huge dark masses appeared. These were tanks, clearly part of the Allied vanguard. People were screaming wildly, trying to climb on the tanks to grasp the soldiers sitting on top. I joined them, frantically trying to reach the outstretched hand of a grinning soldier. This hand represented for me the end of years of fear and anxiety, and I felt it a matter of life or death to be able to shake it. After the release of pent-up emotions triggered by the handshake, I roamed the streets all night, with many people around me doing the same. Only in the morning did I appear at our base in Raoul's apartment, going over these exciting events with the rest of our group.

First day of freedom

The streets were full of people. Long suppressed flags were flying everywhere. We were running around to take in sights of a city full of joy, free of the despised German uniform. What a feeling not to have to look around you constantly for signs of danger! In the evening we were treated to an uplifting sight. The imposing city hall building in the historic central square (Grande Place) was all illuminated, for the first time since the beginning of the war. For all that time the city had been blacked out, to escape detection by British and American warplanes. This was yet another symbol of return to normalcy.

IV. PICKING UP THE PIECES

We are again part of the Resistance

Our group remains together

After the initial euphoria, some of us realized that we still had nowhere to go. I had no idea where my parents might be. Neither did I know anything about any of my friends. Raoul and his parents graciously invited us to stay with them. A reduced version of the Chevlipont group remained, using now as a base Raoul's apartment.

Many Resistance groups had surfaced after the liberation. I was amazed to see how many people had been engaged in underground activities. Since we had been to some extent part of the Resistance, Raoul had obtained armbands of one of the resistance groups, and we were now members of that group.

Political divisions soon surfaced, with conservative leaders concerned about the rising popularity of the leftist movement. This popularity was due mostly to the enormous contribution of the Soviet Union to the destruction of the Nazi war machine and to the aggressive stance of the leftist resistance groups during the occupation. I recall meeting a member of a conservative group who had been asked by his leader whether he would help defeat the leftist (Communist) partisans. His answer had been that, if it came to fighting between two factions, he would rather be on the other side.

A pilgrimage to our hiding place

We were once more on our way to Chevlipont. We had been wondering about our colleagues who had remained there, and also were curious to know what was going on in the area. We had hitched a ride on a military truck. It was quite an experience to return as a free person to the area where I had spent so much time in hiding.

The camp was empty, except for the cook who had returned to keep an eye on it. We learned that the people who had stayed behind had eventually been picked up by the Germans. Later on I found out that my friend Jacques, who had been among them, spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Germany.

We did not linger there, and went to visit our doctor in the neighboring village. His wife greeted us, and during the conversation we noticed a gun lying on the table. They had obviously been part of the Resistance, as we might have guessed. She told us that we might be able to stay at a camp for Resistance fighters in Villers-La-Ville, the neighboring small town.

On patrol

Here we were, walking in the countryside, with rifles on our shoulders. Raoul had told the camp leader a crazy story. We were supposedly coming back from some fighting against the Germans. The leader had taken us in, and the next morning had given us the task to patrol a certain area, looking for suspicious persons such as collaborators or Germans out of uniform. He had seemed a little skeptical of Raoul's story, and, when handing us the rifles, had asked whether we knew how to use them. To our embarrassment, our lack of familiarity with these weapons became obvious as soon as we started to handle them.

This assignment amounted to a tiring walk under the hot sun, lugging our rifles clumsily. The first person we met was a priest on a bicycle. I decided to stop him and ask for his papers, to the embarrassment of my colleagues. When a bus loaded with men appeared, we tried to stop it. The driver, however, ignored us and went on. We looked at each other, not knowing what to do. There were no more encounters, and we returned to the camp tired and frustrated. We thought it best to return to Brussels after this uninspiring experience.

Guarding German prisoners

We were riding on the sides of open trucks crammed with captured German soldiers. They were being transported to the railroad station, for shipment to a prisoner-of-war camp. An enraged populace was screaming insults and curses at them. People tried to climb on the trucks to grab the cowering soldiers. Although our job was to guard the prisoners, we had to protect them from the crowds. By all logic I should have been on the other side of the fence, but somehow I felt no hatred towards these soldiers who would have happily killed me.

After our return from Villers-La-Ville, we had volunteered to help guard captured German soldiers at a military barracks in the neighborhood. This prison was actually run by the British, and our presence was hardly needed. It was quite gratifying for me to watch these formerly proud and arrogant soldiers acting like trembling sheep. I certainly was no longer scared of the German uniform. On the contrary, they were scared of me.

The German prisoners were replaced by Belgian civilians who had collaborated with the Nazis, and we continued our guard duty. This job got tedious after a while and we decided to quit.

I return to my own world

Where are my parents ?

I hadn't heard from my parents in over a year, since the day they had turned me away, hoping that I would not have to share their precarious hiding place. During all that time I did not know whether this silence was because they did not want the camp administration to know that they were still around, or whether they had been caught. Back in Brussels after the liberation, I went to look for them at the place where I last left them, but found no one. I had no way of finding out what had happened to them.

I find my mother

A chance encounter on the street with a former acquaintance of my parents brought me to the world of survivors from the Holocaust. I found out from her that my mother was still around and that she was living in a room near the Gare du Nord. I found her there in a small furnished room, a shadow of her former self. She was emaciated and very distraught. The despair showed through her joy at seeing me. She gave me a sketchy account of her terrible story.

My father was caught

Sometime in the Fall of the previous year, the German police came to the house, looking for a Communist who was living there. They did not find him, checked every apartment in the building, then left. It was early in the morning, and my parents were not yet dressed. They quickly put their clothes on, fearing that the Germans would return. My mother was dressed first, and my father urged her to go out while he was getting ready. After my mother got to the opposite side of the street, she saw the Nazis return and come out with my father.

My mother roamed the streets, not knowing where to go. Together with the despair of losing her husband, she had to cope with the problem of finding shelter. She ended up in a hospital. Much later, while reading the diary of my friend Léon, I saw a mention of him seeing my mother that tragic day, wandering aimlessly. She told him blankly that her husband had just been caught.

Struggle for survival

My mother was tossed around from one precarious shelter to another, but hung on to life. After much wandering, hunger, and despair, she met an acquaintance who was working with an underground group, Solidarité, that was helping Jews in hiding. They provided her with money and a small place to live. She was still there when I found her, showing little interest in what was happening around her.

Rebuilding a household

We had to find a place to live. By then, money from American help organizations was becoming available for resettling survivors. Some of this money was channeled through Jewish organizations in Belgium, and Solidarité was thus able to help us move into a very modest two-room apartment in the attic of a six-story house. One room had a coal stove and a gas outlet, the other served as bedroom for both of us. A toilet with a water faucet was on the landing. Other Jewish survivors were living in this house, and we were glad to find there former friends of my parents. That family was still in one piece, complete with two children. One of them, Sarah, was a good friend of mine since before the war.

We tried to retrieve some of our old furnishings. A visit to the house where my parents had been living last turned up nothing. Evidently neighbors or the landlord had helped themselves to whatever was in the apartment. We were luckier at the shop where my father was working before being caught. His sewing machine was still there and the owners very graciously let us have it back. Selling it gave us some badly needed cash.

Living conditions were not easy at first. Food was still scarce and costly, and finding coal to keep us warm through the harsh winter was also a problem. Some enterprising young people living in the building had obtained a subcontract for making clothing for the British Army. We eagerly took on some of the work, being happy to make some money while contributing, in a very minor way, to the war effort. My mother had learned to sew while helping my father, and I was able to help. Eventually my mother obtained a more regular job in a tailoring shop.

Rebuilding a Jewish Community

Finding old friends

I found out through our contact with Solidarité where people from our old youth group were getting together. I found there some of my old friends. We were all bubbling with enthusiasm, first of all because we could meet now without fear of the Nazi threat. We were exchanging

stories of life in hiding. Léon, whom I had last seen while hiding in Brussels in the Winter of 1942, had managed to find shelter with a peasant family. Henri had spent the whole time in Brussels in relative safety thanks to his identity card without the "J" stamp. Others, helped by courageous non-Jews, had found hiding places in the city, remaining holed up indoors for fear of being spotted by suspicious neighbors. I even found there a former colleague from Chevlipont who had been "dismissed" early in the Fall of 1942. I was surprised to learn that many had been helped by an underground network who was providing money and hiding places. Such a contact would have been most helpful to my parents while they were trying to find a way for me to get out of the city.

It is there that I heard again the haunting song that had impressed me so much in the camp at Chevlipont. Two young men in bedraggled clothes appeared one day and sang it. They introduced it as a song created in a concentration camp.

Preparing a Jewish cultural event

We were also concerned with the future, determined to show that the Nazis had failed to eradicate Jewish life and culture in Belgium, and to fight against possible recurrences of fascism and racism. Our meeting place became a rallying point for many young Jews. Of course, there were other youth organizations, concerned primarily with building a Jewish State in Palestine, where defense against a new aggressor presumably would be more effective. Much of our initial activity was directed toward preparing a public program of songs, poems and skits, as well as a play. This was all going to be in Yiddish. Since I was very proficient in this language, having used it as the primary means of communication with my parents, I was an active participant in this event.

I was even chosen for the play, a farce dealing with several Jews hiding in an attic. They represent different political tendencies, and pass the time engaged in heated debates about the right way for Jews. One is an opportunistic businessman who feels that Jews should blend into the non-Jewish population and just make a good living. Another is an armchair Leftist who is

extolling passionately the virtues of Socialism as the way to salvation for Jews. Another still is pointing to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, where Jews would feel free to control their own destiny, also with great passion. As the wife of the businessman is rummaging around, a handgun falls from the pocket of a jacket hanging on a chair. The jacket belongs to another member of the group, who happens to be out. Our passionate debaters look at the gun with horror, fearing that it would lead them to no good if it were discovered by the Germans. Urged by the wife to hide it somewhere, nobody dares to touch it. The firebrand leftist is afraid; the businessman says that it is none of his business; the Zionist is also scared to touch it. The situation is resolved when the young man who owns the gun appears. While all the others were making speeches, he was quietly doing something about the problem, working with the underground.

I was the Zionist, with the name of Schletch (the Polish word for herring). This name remained with me for many years. The play, as well as the rest of the presentation, was a great success, and helped to lift the sagging spirits of what was left of the Jewish community. I recall feeling rather embarrassed during a repeat performance, when my passionate speech about a Jewish homeland in Palestine evoked a huge round of applause, not because of superior acting but because it expressed the yearnings of many people in the audience.

A new Nazi threat?

Amid our great enthusiasm about the future, we had almost forgotten that there was still a war going on. We got a sobering reminder in the form of news that the Germans had started a surprise offensive in the Ardennes. They seemed to be making great strides, and it was not sure at first that they could be stopped before reaching Brussels. In our exalted state, we were determined not to let them subjugate us again, and vowed to fight with all our might against the Nazi army. Fortunately, their advance was soon stopped and we never had to test the extent of our resolve.

Waiting for death-camp survivors

Gruesome discovery

With the first sightings of extermination camps on Polish and German territory, the full horror of the fate of the Jews deported by the Nazis started to unfold. Pictures of crematoria, gas chambers, mass graves, massive mounds of gold fillings, hair clippings, shoes, came back from the war zones. Other pictures of dazed survivors left behind by the fleeing Germans, looking like living skeletons, gave an inkling of the terrible living conditions in the camps. The Nazis had set up an elaborate, well-oiled machinery for the systematic destruction of the Jews rounded up from the territories under their control. It was then that we realized that there was very little hope of seeing again any friends and relatives taken away by the Germans.

Hoping against hope

A trickle of camp survivors started to appear, as more camps were being liberated. All of us who had lost someone were waiting anxiously for some news from international aid organizations. For most of us, however, the waiting was futile. As time went by without any news, we had to realize that my father was not going to be part of the survivors. Eventually, someone who had come back from Auschwitz, the most notorious death camp, told us of having been transported there with my father. He spoke of a man greatly despondent, very pessimistic about prospects for survival. The impact on me of this devastating news was blunted by my enthusiastic involvement with the youth group's activities, but gave me increased impetus for working towards a "better" world.

I go back to school

I look for a job

I was now over seventeen, and I felt that it was time for me to earn a living. I had been dependent on other people long enough. Good friends of my parents had set up a leather goods shop and were doing well. I went to ask them to take me in, but they absolutely refused. They would not think of letting me do manual labor. They said that my father had great hopes for me, and had even asked them to help me continue my studies if anything should happen to him. This sounded very nice, but going back to school seemed frivolous to me. The outside financial help, although greatly appreciated, was minimal. I did not want to leave to my mother the burden of supporting the two of us.

I learn to be a typist

Since I had no skills, it was decided that I would enroll in a secretarial school, where I would learn stenography and the use of a typewriter. The people at Solidarité would give me a small stipend for the few months needed to complete the course. The training, which consisted mainly of endless typing exercises, was very tedious. Yet I was determined to go through with it and to start earning some money.

Well, there I was, with a certificate stating that I could type correctly so many words per minute. I quickly got an office job, but just as quickly decided that this kind of work was not for me. This decision was prompted in large part by friends from our youth organization, particularly by the example of one of them who was going to enroll at the Medical School.

Catching up on three lost years of schooling

It looked like I would have to prepare myself for a more intellectual career. The first step was to try to make up for the three lost years of High School. The government was offering a special abbreviated exam for those who had to miss school because of the war. Successful completion

would provide the equivalent of a High School diploma, which permitted access to university-level education. Again Solidarité came to the rescue, in the form of a stipend to enroll in a private school which was offering accelerated courses. The stipend money was actually coming from Jewish American aid organizations.

To my surprise, I found that the long time out of school had not blunted my capacity for learning. On the contrary, I was able to absorb new knowledge with great facility. I was so happy with my progress that I talked two of my friends into trying this great school. However, they did not take to it as I did, and soon gave up.

No more meek submission to insults !

A strange thing was happening. I had been called to the front of the class to recite some poem. Before starting, I cleared my voice, eliciting a few chuckles from some of my classmates. The teacher got angry, probably thinking that I was clowning, and sent me back to my seat with a grade of zero for this task. I sat down, furious and perplexed. My classmates also did not see the reason for this outburst. At the end of the class, the teacher came to me and offered to eradicate my bad grade if I would apologize for my behavior. I was still seething, and told him that there was nothing to apologize for. He looked at me, and said that "in the Belgian way, when one does something wrong and apologizes, all is forgiven." The slur about me being Jewish and not attuned to civilized behavior was obvious, and sickeningly reminiscent of our constant exposure to insults under the Nazis. Now that they were gone, I was free to respond in kind. My immediate reply was: "In my way, when one does nothing wrong one does not apologize." The whole class was standing around us listening to this exchange. This represented quite a loss of face for the teacher, and he was enraged. Instead of striking me, as I am sure he was tempted to do, he said that he would report me to the Director. I replied that I would complain to the Director myself.

The outcome of this incident was that I would avoid further confrontation with this teacher by not participating in his class anymore. This was meant not as a reprimand for me, but simply as a way for the Director to avoid taking sides.

I pass the examination

We were assembled in a large room, waiting anxiously for the verdict from the judges. After taking first the written part of the exam, I had to wait for about a week for the notification that I had done well enough to qualify for the more difficult oral component. The final decision for each of us was going to be handed out formally to the whole group. The procedure was definitely invented by an evil mind. The president of the jury started sounding out a long list of names, then said that those had failed the exam. Fortunately that list did not include me. A friend of mine who had also taken the exam was not so lucky. Then came another list of names, with the announcement at the end that those had passed. So I had to sweat it out till all the names had been mentioned before being sure that I had succeeded.

The way to the University was now open to me, as was the road to recovery from the physical and emotional damage caused by the Nazis.

V. AFTERMATH

It is now many years later, and many of the events during the Nazi occupation have become blurred in my memory. However, these events have left an indelible mark on my personality. People in uniform, as symbol of authority, still make me feel uncomfortable. I also abhor the wearing of identifying labels, such as political buttons, even though I have no compunction about expressing my beliefs. Momentary panic still seizes me when faced with a stranger asking me for directions, and my garbled answers are not very useful. These effects, however, pale when compared to the devastating consequences for my mother. She never recovered emotionally from her ordeals. This once very resourceful and spirited woman remained brooding, depressed, unwilling to enter into new relationships and extremely fearful of governmental authority.

My father's early disappearance left me with only spotty impressions of him. I remember him as stern, but highly devoted to his family. His dogged determination to provide for us, to the point of braving daily the danger of roundups while going to work, was admirable. I feel that I was robbed of the opportunity to get to know him. To my mother his loss was devastating and she steadfastly refused to consider remarrying.

My feelings toward the German people are ambivalent. Whenever I have set foot on German soil, I have felt rather uncomfortable. However, I have had friendly and warm relations with individual Germans that I have had occasion to meet. I was particularly moved by the young German couple that I met at the Weizmann Institute. She was pregnant, and had wanted to come to have her baby in Israel. Nevertheless, the sight of boisterous and noisy groups of Germans, such as tourists, makes me uneasy.

I had wondered how I would react to the sight of someone wearing a swastika. We have been exposed to numerous images of Neo-Nazis parading in the hated uniform, and I have always felt enraged at these sights. When I finally came face to face with a leather-clad slob wearing the infamous insignia on his chest, I did nothing, and felt angry at myself for letting the challenge go.

I still feel strong kinship with people who are subjected to oppressive regimes. living in constant fear for their lives and unable to defend themselves. I also rejoice when I see outside powers intervening as liberators, and become very emotional at the sight of wildly cheering crowds greeting their rescuers.

When we were cowering under the German terror, I always regarded the outside world as anxious to the rescue, but unable to do so because they were engaged in their own struggle for survival. Fortunately, they prevailed and as a consequence the complete destruction of the Jews was prevented. Events since the defeat of the Nazis, however, have shown that the civilized world can be on occasion indifferent to the slaughter of large populations, and reluctant to intervene even when such intervention would come at little cost. Events have also shown that the propensity to commit genocide is quite widespread, and that many could succumb to such temptation, given the appropriate circumstances. Although the holocaust against the Jews was unique in terms of its scale and of the well organized and efficient way in which it was carried out, many other ethnic groups have been subjected to slaughter since then.

I regard extremism and fanaticism as the main driving forces for genocide, and any defenseless ethnic group as a potential victim. In this respect fanatical Jews can be as bloodthirsty as any other extremist group, even though Jews, who have been intimate with the horrors of racism for centuries, should know better. I also regard with utter contempt and disbelief the efforts of misguided "civil libertarians" who fight for the right of Neo-Nazis to spread their gospel of hatred and mayhem. We are all susceptible to the virus of ethnic discrimination,

and it does not take much to inflame the passions of people who may feel that they have a God-given mission to fulfill. I feel that the only way to prevent recurrences of our nightmare is to oppose by all means the spread of ethnic hatred before it acquires a life of its own and becomes again uncontrollable.

